

The Philosopher and the Sage: Plato and Lao-Tzu on Following the Way of Nature

Lao-Tzu, paradoxical poet-philosopher of the mysterious Tao, father of the mystical-meditative philosophical religion of Taoism. Plato, mathematically-minded theorizer of Forms, father of Academic philosophy and Western rationalism. What could these two foundational thinkers of East and West possibly have in common? Quite a lot, as it turns out. As we shall see, for both Plato¹ and Lao-Tzu, metaphysics and ethics are intimately and essentially connected, because human beings are intimately and essentially related to the order of being. In particular, I will show that there are significant parallels between their accounts of the highest metaphysical principle, of the cosmic order that follows from that principle, and of the life that human beings should live in response to that principle and order. The paper will proceed by examining each of these areas in turn.

I. First Principles: The Good and the Tao

At the heart of Plato's *Republic*² Socrates introduces the Idea of the Good as the “greatest study,” and so the linchpin of philosophic education, with the argument that justice and other good things depend on the Good for their goodness, as their benefit to us depends on our knowledge of the Good that makes them good (504e-505b). His account of the Good itself proceeds by way of analogy: just as the sun is the source of the light that links vision with visible objects and also the source of the generation, growth, and nourishment of such objects, the Good is the source of the truth and being that links intelligence to intelligible objects and also the source of the existence and being (*einai* and *ousia*) of such objects (507a-509c)—as well as of the the sun, its “offspring,” and so by extension of all *its* generated objects (517c). Hence, the

1 To keep this comparison manageable, I restrict my attention to only two Platonic texts, the *Republic* and the *Philebus*.

2 All translations from Plato are my own, from the Oxford Classical Texts, ed. Burnet.

Good is the ultimate source of all goodness, truth, knowledge, and being, although it is itself called “beyond being” and so is not itself a being at all (508e-509b). Socrates then incorporates the sun image into the subsequent image of the cave and makes it the ultimate end of the philosophical journey. The goal is to apprehend the sun itself and behold everything else in its light, after which the enlightened philosopher will return to the cave to bring the benefit of his enlightenment to his fellow citizens.

However, even Socrates himself, a self-proclaimed philosopher (cf. 496c), claims only to possess opinion, not knowledge, concerning the Good (506c-e), which suggests that he has not fully escaped the cave himself. Moreover, he refuses even to provide a full account of his own opinion or of the process of dialectic by which knowledge of the Good is supposed to be gained, offering instead images presented in often mystical-religious language (cf. 506e ff., 508a, 509a, 509c). Finally, he admits that he has had to leave out a great deal of relevant material (509c). We are left, then, with an evocative account of a transcendent mystery, which as the source of being, goodness, and knowledge, serves as the orienting object of the philosophical quest.

Turning now to the *Tao Te Ching*, we may note a similar mysteriousness and transcendence associated with the Tao. Tao is generally translated as “Way,” but as we are told right from the beginning, we cannot simply assume we know its name or meaning. The first lines say something like this: “The Tao that can be Tao'd is not the eternal Tao, / The Name that can be named is not the eternal Name.”³ This paradox, that the main subject of discussion cannot be discussed or named, yields additional paradoxes in turn, which together serve to reinforce the essential mysteriousness of the Tao. This mysteriousness, however, is itself revealing of the nature of the Tao, since the Tao is not itself a being that can be known and named but rather the

3 In this paper I use the Addiss-Lombardo translation: *Lao-Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993). My translation of the first two lines, however, is more literal than theirs. Compare verse 25 on naming the Tao.

source of all such beings. In fact, as the following lines suggest, the mysteriousness of the Tao lies not just in its eternal indeterminacy but also in its temporal determining of the world and all its beings.⁴ Tao as such is always Tao'ing, the nameless always naming, the mystery always manifesting, the origin always mothering, engendering, nurturing (cf. 51).

Seen in this way, Tao is not a thing or being but an activity or event, and its generative self-actualization goes by the name of Te: the Power, Virtue, or Efficacy of the Way (to list some common translations). Tao is described in terms of its function and activity in relation to the beings of this world, not its nature or qualities as a being in its own right, and the images used to depict it—including the mother, female, infant, valley, water, and uncarved block—collectively serve to reinforce this point. When the nature of Tao itself is referred to, no determinate qualities are ascribed to it and the emphasis is rather on the inscrutable non-dependent arising of Tao as the Way that all beings follow: “Humans follow earth / Earth follows heaven / Heaven follows TAO. / TAO follows its own nature” (26).⁵ Tao in itself is empty but not lacking, nonbeing but not nothing (cf. 40). The emptiness of Tao becomes the empowering center of beings in the way of the wheel's hub or the room's space (cf. 4, 11). Simply put, Tao is what Tao does, and what Tao does is effortlessly and unceasingly give rise to beings, nurture them, and receive them back again.⁶

4 After the opening two lines quoted above, the verse runs as follows: “Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth. / Naming: the mother of ten thousand things. / Empty of desire, perceive mystery. / Filled with desire, perceive manifestations. / These have the same source, but different names. / Call them both deep— / Deep and again deep: / The gateway to all mystery.” The exact referent of “these” is not entirely clear. Some commentators have “mystery and manifestations,” some “empty of desire” and “filled with desire,” and some “origin” and “mother.” However, since Tao is somehow both the transcendent source and the nurturing mother, filling all things without *being* all things, and thus imparting mystery to the entire cosmos, this ambiguity may be part of the point. Tao is everywhere and nowhere, in everything and nothing in particular.

5 This “own nature” translates *tzu-jan*, a key phrase in the *Tao Te Ching* that means something like “self-naturing,” “self-deriving,” or “being itself.”

6 So at the beginning of verse 25, we have, “Something unformed and complete / Before heaven and earth were born, / Solitary and silent, / Stands alone and unchanging, / Pervading all things without limit. / It is like the mother of all under heaven, / But I don't know its name.” Similarly, verse 52 states, “The world has a source: the world's mother. / Once you have the mother, / You know the children. / Once you know the children, / Return to

In sum, both Tao and Good are transcendent, themselves “mysterious,” “beyond being,” and resistant to conceptual-linguistic definition. Consequently, images are used to capture the nature of both. Their natures are indeterminate and independent, “self-naturing,” but linked to the world and its beings as their generative source and informing-determining power: naturing, nurturing, ordering, and benefitting, as the central images of sun and mother convey. In this generative and nurturing activity, moreover, we may say that both the Tao and the Good themselves are good. At this point, then, let us consider more specifically how both Good and Tao become manifested in the world and its beings by examining their mediating principles: the Limit and Unlimited, and the Yin and Yang, respectively.

II. Cosmology: *Apeiron* and *Peras*, *Yin* and *Yang*

Plato introduces the principles of Limit and Unlimited, *peras* and *apeiron*, in the *Philebus*, in the context of an ongoing debate about the nature of the Good. The Limit and Unlimited are presented along with their Mixture and the Cause of the mixture as the four “forms” or “kinds” that determine the nature of all beings.⁷ From the context of the introduction and analysis of the four kinds, it is clear enough that they are meant to serve as the metaphysical model for the ethical ordering of human life. The reason explicitly given for their introduction is to help determine “second place,” or the relative ranking of pleasure and wisdom/intellect within the life that involves the mixture of both, which has been agreed to be the best life for human beings (22a-23b). After Socrates has gone through each of the four kinds in turn, he applies them back to human nature by categorizing the mixed life as mixture, pleasure as unlimited, and intellect as cause. Specifically, intellect acts causally by introducing limits into otherwise unlimited pleasure and so brings the human mixture into being as harmonious and good.

the mother. / Your body dies. / There is no danger.”

7 The “things that are” or “everything that exists now in the universe” (23c).

Moreover, since the four kinds are not just applicable to human beings but to all beings, we may say that in some sense the goodness of anything and everything depends on how Limit and Unlimited are mixed in the natures of particular existing beings. Mixture is defined as “genesis into being from the measures produced with the limit” (26d). There is no clear divide between generating and improving a being, because the “being” towards which “genesis” occurs is not just any particular being or state of being that happens to result from a process of generation, but the being that serves as the governing standard for every generative process that produces a being of that type. Being, *ousia*, is thus an ontological standard as well as the standard of goodness for particular instantiations of a type, and this standard is the formal limit that is applied through specific measures that bring definition and order to unlimited materials and so result in the generation of beings.

Here too we find parallels in the philosophy of Lao-Tzu, although expressed far more elusively and elliptically. A good place to start is verse 42: “TAO engenders One, / One engenders Two, / Two engenders Three, / Three engenders the ten thousand things. / The ten thousand things carry shade / And embrace sunlight. / Shade and sunlight, yin and yang, / Breath blending into harmony.” As mysterious as it is, this verse may be interpreted as follows: Tao becomes manifest as Te, One; Te becomes manifest as Yin-Yang, Two; Yin-Yang becomes manifest as harmonious breath, Three; and this breath or *ch'i* becomes manifest in the generation of ten thousand things. This is the only verse in the *Tao Te Ching* that explicitly mentions the principles of Yin and Yang, but in their representation of the relation of opposites they are nonetheless of central importance to the text. Yin and Yang most literally mean the shaded and sunny sides of a mountain, respectively, but also connote darkness and light, earth and fire, winter and summer, female and male, and other such complementary opposites. On the cosmic

level the fertile interaction of Yin-Yang may be expressed in terms of Heaven and Earth as the bellows blowing life-giving wind (cf. 5); and on the ontological level, in terms of being and non-being yielding to each other and giving rise to all beings (cf. 2, 40). The movement of such opposites is cyclical, their activity cooperative. Beneath or beyond all such oppositions, however, is Tao itself as the groundless ground of all beings and of the world itself.

In comparison to the Platonic duality previously discussed, we may note the following. First, Yin parallels the *apeiron* as the indeterminate, unlimited, or unbounded; while Yang parallels the *peras* as the determinate, limited, bounded. In their cooperative union as mixture, the “third” principle (cf. 26c-d, 27b, 31c), Limit and Unlimited manifest the generative power of the cause in “the things that are” just as Yin and Yang in their harmonious union as *chi*, the third principle, bring the generative power of the Tao to the “ten thousand things.” Simply put, on either account, in order to *be* at all a being must arise in and towards its determinate limits or Yang aspect out of an indeterminate field or ground, its Yin aspect, as a mixture of harmoniously balanced elements—and in due course, return again. However, the manifestation of these principles in the case of human beings requires special attention. Accordingly, we turn now to examine how the philosopher as the human being who best achieves the good life becomes a living manifestation of the Good in much the same way as Lao-Tzu's ideal human being, the sage, becomes a living manifestation of the Tao.

III. Ethics: The Philosopher and the Sage

In the *Republic* Books 6 and 7, in the context of arguing that philosophers should rule as kings, Socrates defines the philosopher as a lover of learning (474c-475c) and the object of philosophical learning as “being” or the forms (475e-476d ff.), and then beyond these as the idea of the Good, the “greatest study” to which all of philosophical education is preparatory (504e

ff.). As loving, philosophy is erotic; as learning, it is epistemic; as oriented towards the forms and the Good it is metaphysical; and as applying the Good and the forms to one's own life and that of others it is ethical and political. In fact, philosophy is all these at once, and it is the Good that unifies these aspects of philosophy just as it unifies all of learning and reality as the ultimate source of knowledge, truth, and being. Knowledge of the good is supposed to provide the philosopher with his most important qualification to rule the city, as his unstinting pursuit of such knowledge is supposed to provide him with the virtues that serve as a secondary qualification to rule by diverting his desires from the body and material goods and sharpening his intellectual skills (cf. 484a-487a). In addition, the philosopher's concern with the forms and the good leads him to imitate their nature, which helps to bring order and justice first to his own nature and then to that of others (500c-d). So even if he does not actually rule as king, he will still seek to bring other people to enlightenment and thereby influence the city, just as we see Socrates doing throughout the dialogues.

In the *Philebus* learning is presented as the culminating example of pure pleasure (51e-52c), while the purest kind of learning is described as dialectical activity, the activity devoted to apprehending eternal and unchanging reality out of a deep "love of truth" (57e-59d). The philosopher as the lover of truth and practitioner of dialectic thus realizes the purest forms of both pleasure and intellect and so lives the mixed life on the highest level. And since the intellect manifests the causal principle in us as pleasure does the unlimited, the philosopher achieves the mixed life not only by experiencing pleasure directly in intellectual activity but also by bringing the insights he gains through this activity to bear on his own life, specifically by applying the standards of health, moderation, and virtue as limits and measures to his experience of pleasure and pain, and to his sensual, embodied existence more generally (cf. 63e). In this

way, just as in the *Republic*, the philosopher makes himself good by imitating the Good. That is, by harmonizing limit and unlimited in himself through the causal activity of his intellect, he lives the mixed life according to the model of the cosmic mixture, and so brings the symmetry, beauty, and truth of the Good into being in and as himself (cf. 64e-65a).

Of course, Socrates never claims in the *Philebus* that he has himself completed this process nor that it is even possible to do so; just as in the *Republic* Socrates neither claims knowledge of the Good himself nor says that possessing such knowledge is a defining characteristic of philosophers outside of the ideal city. In fact, the cosmic model that the philosopher follows itself suggests that the process of generation, ordering, and perfecting is always ongoing, for if the process were ever completed, the unlimited would be completely abolished and with it all generation and production, growth and progress. The unlimited is thus an essential feature of human nature, just as it is an essential feature of nature itself. The philosophical life is thus always incomplete, always on the way to knowledge and goodness. Nevertheless, the philosopher is a lover of knowledge even if not a complete knower, just if not perfect, political if not a politician, and he is all of these things in and as an expression of his perpetual pursuit of the Good.

Turning now to the philosopher's counterpart in the *Tao Te Ching*, the Taoist sage, we see a similar parallelism between the cosmic and human, the metaphysical and ethical. The simplest and most straightforward statement comes in 23: "Therefore, in following TAO: / Those on the way become the way, / Those who gain become the gain, / Those who lose become the loss."⁸

This paradox of gain within loss (and loss within gain) is reflected in three central characteristics

8 "Gain" (*te*) here and in the following lines is "virtue" (*Te*) in other texts; the characters are different, though according to Red Pine, originally interchangeable (*Lao-Tzu's Tao Te Ching*, trans. Red Pine [Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009], p. 47). Ames-Hall take *Te*, translated as "character," and read the passage as "Those who are committed to character (*de*) in what they do / Achieve this character; / While those who lose it / Are themselves lost" (111-112).

of the sage: non-doing (*wu-wei*), non-knowing (*wu-chih*), and non-desiring (*wu-yu*).⁹ The sage strives not to act of his own accord and for himself but in and as the Tao in the world. For this reason “nothing” is “not done,” because the Tao is the “inexhaustible” source of the world though empty and selfless in itself (cf. 48, 4-6). The sage lacks knowledge, does not pursue knowledge, and has the mind of an infant, yet knows himself and knows “not-knowing” (20, 33, 71-72). That is, he understands what and who he is as a being among other beings in the world within the nurturing embrace of Tao, just as he understands that he cannot fully understand Tao, and that all the names, concepts, and categories offered by civilization and its institutional education serve to obscure rather than illuminate the nameless and mysterious Tao. And he does not desire, presume, claim, or contend for himself because desire in the usual sense takes as its object the body, its pleasures, material possessions, and power, all of which are transient and dependent goods that agitate the senses and emotions, incite conflict among people, and so prevent peace and genuine contentment (cf. 3, 9, 37, 44, 46, 52-53, 64). Just as the Tao “endures without desire” (34) so too does the sage, and by not desiring for himself but “cling[ing] to the One” he is able to “take care of this world” (22). Consequently, “the Sage / Always helps people / And rejects none, / Always helps all beings, / And rejects none. / This is called practicing brightness” (27; cf. 13, 49, 64). In other words, insofar and in the same way as Tao is good, so too is the sage.

To this we may add that the sage acts as ruler in the same way as the Tao. He rules without acting, knowing, desiring, competing, contending, or coercing—in effect, ruling by *not* ruling. And by ruling without ruling, the sage is supposed to inculcate the same qualities in the people that he himself possesses. He simplifies, calms, pacifies, liberates, and removes the

9 So we are told: “Pursue knowledge, gain daily. / Pursue TAO, lose daily. / Lose and again lose, / Arrive at non-doing. / Non-doing—and nothing not done. / Take the entire world as nothing. / Make the least effort, / And the world escapes you” (48).

confusing and counterproductive accretions of conventional government, education, morality, prosperity, and culture, while appearing himself to be hardly present and active at all (cf. 3, 17-19, 37, 57-61, 65-66, 72, 74-75, 78-80). He accomplishes these tasks in the same way the Tao accomplishes what it accomplishes: naturally, spontaneously, without effort: “I do nothing [*wu wei*] / And people transform themselves. / I enjoy serenity / And people govern themselves. / I cultivate emptiness / And people become prosperous. / I have no desires / And people simplify themselves” (57).

IV. Conclusion

To be sure, this description of the sage-ruler sounds paradoxical and fantastical, but so too does Plato's description of the philosopher king. But whatever the likelihood of such a ruler arising, it is likely enough at least that both Plato and Lao-Tzu are seeking to transform their societies by inspiring their readers to transform themselves, so that we will come to act as sages or philosophers in our own lives and in this way transform not only ourselves but also those around us. In both cases such a transformation can only take place by conforming ourselves to the model of a transcendent reality beyond us, whether that of the Tao, its *Te*, and the harmonious “breath” (*ch'i*) of Yin-Yang that gives rise to the ten thousand things or that of the Good, the forms of virtue, and the harmonious mixture of Limit and Unlimited that brings beings into being. In other words, in both cases we have a metaphysically informed ethics.

Of course, there are differences. Rather than embracing the indeterminate or Unlimited, Plato's philosopher seeks to render it determinate, for in this way he conforms to the cosmic order of Limit and Unlimited. Rather than emptying himself, he seeks to perfect himself, for in this way he draws closer to the source and model of perfection, sufficiency, and desirability, the Good. Rather than cultivating non-action, non-knowing, and non-desiring, the philosopher is

actively and passionately devoted to obtaining knowledge and virtue. Yet these differences are not as great as they seem at first. As we have seen, the Good is itself transcendently indeterminate, and the indeterminate element of beings is an essential element of their being and goodness. Plato's philosopher seeks not to destroy the Unlimited but to harmonize it with the Limit in measured mixtures. His activity is dedicated to gaining knowledge about the Good and of the beings that it informs; and he seeks to take on the nature of the Good and its forms while leading others to do the same. At the same time, Plato calls into question the capacity of the philosopher to attain his ultimate goal. His archetypal philosopher, Socrates, knows his own lack of knowledge while seeking to reveal to others their own lack of knowledge and false pretenses to wisdom and virtue. The philosopher seeks virtue and wisdom not in the conventional morality and culturally determined education of the city but in objective standards rooted in the order of nature. And the philosopher's passions and desires are oriented overwhelmingly to the ends of truth and virtue, leaving him as indifferent as the Taoist sage to the so-called goods of the body or material world.

In turn, Lao-Tzu's sage seeks not to eliminate the determinate Yang aspect of himself or of other beings but to harmonize Yin and Yang in their various manifestations in order to live according to the Tao. Just as the Tao is always active in the world engendering and nurturing, so too is the sage, and his activity moreover is centered on seeking to take on the virtue of the way, the Te of the Tao, along with the enlightened knowledge and self-knowledge that this activity brings. While seeking this kind of knowledge and virtue, he exposes the false pretenses of traditional knowledge and conventional morality, and thus relieves his fellow human beings of such obscuring obstacles so that they will have the openness and emptiness necessary to perceive the mystery of the Tao. And since, as we are told already in the opening verse of the *Tao Te*

Ching, one perceives this mystery only when empty of desire, it is necessary that one not only overcome false knowledge and morality but also the false goods that all too often drive people to seek fulfillment from the transient ten thousand things instead of the engendering and nurturing mother of them all. In the most important sense, then, we may say that Plato's philosopher and Lao-Tzu's sage share a common goal and undertake a common pursuit: namely, to apprehend and live in accordance with the ultimate source of being and way of nature while bringing others to do the same.